Two Left Shoes

Thomas F. Heston

In retrospect, it's not surprising that I experienced homelessness during one winter as a college student. The winter of 1983 in Seattle was typical: cold, cloudy, and wet. Peanut butter was my primary food. I had a small camping stove for coffee but lacked any other means of heat. Gasworks Park was my main source of drinking water.

But my story is not unusual; it is regrettably far too common. After all, on any single night in the U.S., about 1 in 500 individuals, representing a diverse cross-section of the population, find themselves without housing (1). Among college students, estimates indicate that about 5% to 10% will experience homelessness at some point during their academic journey (2,3). Although many temporary couch surf with friends, a significant proportion, like myself, end up sleeping outdoors or urban camping (4).

Globally, hundreds of millions of people have inadequate shelter every night. The hard reality is that individuals of all ages and backgrounds, including children, students, adults, and seniors, have either already confronted or will confront housing insecurity and homelessness.

The primary factor leading to my experience of homelessness was quite straightforward: not enough money. While it is true that many people become homeless as a consequence of alcoholism, drug addiction or mental health challenges (5), housing costs and simple economics are also primary contributors to homelessness (6). For those teetering on the brink of economic instability, even a minor financial setback can precipitate homelessness. And the emotional turmoil, isolation, anxiety, and harsh realities of life on the street can be the cause of drug addiction and mental health challenges. When an individual is unexpectedly thrust into homelessness, their mental and emotional well-being can suffer significantly. Their whole world becomes chaotic, filled with uncertainty. And that's what happened to me.

At first, however, I had this unexplained confidence, unaware of the harsh realities ahead. I thought it was no big deal because I had a plan. I would save up my money, get a

better job, and then get back on my feet in just a few months. I was sure of it.

Two Left Shoes ♫

He's got two left shoes and dirty feet.
He's got nothing to lose, he can't make ends meet.
He's always down and out, cause he ain't got no luck.
He'll never get ahead, cause he can't make a buck.

But he says I'm alright, just need a small correction,
I'm gonna be okay, just need some redirection.
I'm alright. I got the silent connection.
It's gonna be okay.

He's got holes in his shoes, feet always wet.
Wanting to make a change, but it's not happening yet.
Lying down on the ground, but always getting back up.
Forever pushed around, but he thinks - so what.

And he says I'm alright, just need a small correction,
I'm gonna be okay, just need some redirection.
I'm alright. I got the silent connection.
Silent connection.

And he says I don't know where I'm going, but I'm gonna be okay.
Oh, I don't know what's gonna happen, but it's gonna shine today.
And he says I'm alright, with the silent connection.
I'm gonna be okay.

He's got two left shoes and nothing to lose, but he will find his way.
He's down on his luck, can't make a buck, but it will shine today.

But with time, winter can grind anyone down, especially when combined with the never-ending rain. Cold and wet isn't a great combination for the body or spirit. Regardless of the weather, depression rates are approximately 10 times greater in the homeless compared to the nonhomeless population (7). My initial optimism started to wane from the toll of constant pressure, sleepless nights, and the ever-present uncertainty. The wet clothes would never quite dry out, and the shoes were always a little damp. That early spark of adventure soon died from the constant Seattle downpour. I thought I had nothing left to lose, but I didn't realize just how deep the darkness could penetrate.

Searching

The cold seeps through my soul.
Cracked lips hunger for meals I can't afford.
Faded memories and fragments of joy
Can't shelter me anymore.

Aimless and adrift, there's a pain in my heart.
Why was I so easy to discard, when times got hard?
With no shoulder to lean on, and no one to blame.
It's as if, inside, nothing remains.

So I keep searching, for my home.
I don't understand why I feel so down and alone.
So I keep looking, to find someone
Who can help me get better, and give me some love.

Walking on, trying to change my story.
There must be something out there other than fear.

Then comes darkness, filling the streets.
Cold pierces deep, and the rain hides my weeping.
No haven in sight, no rest for my feet.

So I keep searching, for my home.
I just don't know what happened, but now I'm alone.
So I keep wondering, if there will be someone
To help me in from the cold and give me some love.

Restless all through the night.
No room by the fire, no rest for my weary head.
Then, a voice offered me this escape,
Said it would make everything go easy.
So I did.

But I keep searching.
And keep wandering.
It's so confusing.
So I keep moving.

Day after day, no hope in sight.
A misdirection, then lost.
Better to stay up all night.

So I drift along, aimless through the street.
I can't see what's ahead.
It's just a sea of concrete.

Shivering in darkness, I hide.
I've no place to go, no end in my sights.
Won't someone just please hold me tight,
And give me peace for at least tonight.
But I'm still alone.

So I keep searching.
And keep wandering.
It's so confusing.
So I keep moving.

Searching and wandering, then moving on.
Something is waiting, I know it won't be long.

As the winter wore on, living alone created this overwhelming isolation. In 1983, there were no cell phones, and only buildings had landlines. There was no email, no instant messaging, and no social media. So my days became filled with aimless walks on the avenue, and I would look endlessly at all the people walking down the street. Nearly all people avoided my gaze, leaving me with this overwhelming sense of rejection (8). But occasionally, a connection would trigger a sudden glimmer of light. Their unexpected smile, a spark of light in their eyes, or just a simple nod would give me hope. That one person who can see through the hardened shell you've built up can make all the difference.

Those fragments of kindness cut through the layers of defenses I had forged. They reminded me that we all have value; we all belong. We all have the power to affirm the intrinsic humanity in others and uplift a fragile soul, if only for a moment, by truly seeing them. Beneath the drab monochrome mask lies an infinite spectrum of stories hidden in cemented avenues of isolation. There's great value in a friendly face.

A Friendly Face

Trudging slowly through the crowd
Head down and unseen.
Passing by oblivious
Nobody noticing.

Then, a glance with a smile
and eyes full of light.
Breaking through the maze
Came their friendly gaze.

A flash of connection
and then it's gone.
Brief recognitions before moving on.
But my heart remembers.

Wandering through the crowd
Those few stand out.
They can see, and we connect.
The moments never-ending.

The masses come and go
In endless waves of motion.
Still, there are more than a few
That I wish I knew:

A friendly face.
The kind heart.
Warm laughter.
Unexpected beauty.

They have an inner fire
That warms the soul.
They will be there for me.
They will not be forgotten.

Sunshine fills the darkest places.
Moonshine, twilight, sparkles of connection.
All inspire me, restore faith,
and lift my spirits.

For them, I will give more.
I will pay it forward and
Be better than before.

Through the Cold Weather ♫

Deep inside
My spirit reignites
A calling I can't deny.

I'm gonna figure this out,
It's time to be bold and strong
Today, I'll break through the night.

I gotta do better, gotta be better. Just better.
Gotta make my way, gonna find my strength, and do better.

After the stormy night, comes your morning light.

You helped me find strength in my hardest fight
And it came from somewhere deep inside.

So I'm gonna do better, I'm gonna be better. Just better.
I'll make it through the coldest weather. And do better.

I still have it inside, so I'll make things right.
Just wait, you'll see- I have the strength in me.
And it's time I set it free.

Back to you.
Gonna make my way back to you.
It's been inside, and now I see the truth.
Gonna find my way back to you.

He's got two left shoes,
nothing left to lose
but he will be okay.
He's down on his luck,
but he'll get back up,
and it will shine today.

So that's my story - not so much a tale of personal hardship but a glimpse into the crushing burdens and invisible wounds too many people in our community must endure. I was one of the lucky ones. After taking time off to work and get my finances in order, I returned to school, finished my degree, and answered my calling. But the story does not end there. Our experiences reverberate throughout our lives, as this one did in mine.

To this day, I remember that as a medical student in the late 1980s, it was still common in the hospital to hear someone say, "the ankle fracture in room #9" or "the abdominal pain in room #21." These doctors and nurses were caring individuals, yet

something fundamental got lost when referring to patients by their diagnosis. Thankfully, medical professionals continually engage in research, and science confirmed what we all know to be true: there is real value in calling patients by their names (9). So, at St. Louis University, we were taught to refer to patients by name and recognize them as individuals, not their medical diagnoses. Similarly, those who will be without a home tonight are our neighbors and our friends, first and foremost. They are vital members of our community. Our common humanity demands that we recognize them by name, see them as individuals, and acknowledge their importance in our lives.

While I was homeless, disheveled, cold, and ragged-looking, several people gave up on me. They gave me a label and walked away. But more than a few remained rock solid, true friends. They never doubted. With their courage, I found my courage. With their confidence, I found my strength. To them, I wasn't a diagnosis; I was "Tom."

These small gestures of warmth and care - the friendly face, the listening ear, the door kept open - kindle embers of resilience where resignation reigns. With kindness and compassion, we can help others find their strength and reawaken their courage. If there is one thing I've learned, it's that it takes a strong person to weather the challenges of homelessness. They deserve our respect, our love, and our kindness.

Full of Love and Full of Hope

Full of love and full of hope
with kindness and compassion.
Doing what we can and must
To build a strong foundation.

Hope and love are just the start.
The onset of the journey.
Courage and strength can be hard
The path is never-ending.

Our commitment to action
Is an expression of love.
Boldness strengthens our passion.
Simple acts can be enough.

When we’re working together
The bridges shrink the divide.
Small actions become boulders.
Shelters from the cold outside.

More power can be harnessed.
Their names we can remember.
Love, kindness, strength, and boldness.
We can and will do better.

Supplemental Sheet Music

1. Two Left Shoes
2. Searching
3. Through the Cold Weather

Performance Notes

This essay is meant to be performed by reading aloud the narration, singing the songs, and saying the poems in sequence as presented.

Acknowledgment

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Two Left Shoes



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ThomasF Heston

Andante (♩ = 80)




7
3
He's al ways out - ta luck 'cause he aint got no luck but he says
For ev er pushed a round but he thinks so what and he says
9
I'm al - right just need a small-cor-rect - ion I'm gon-na be O-
12
kay. just need some re - di - rect ion I'm al -

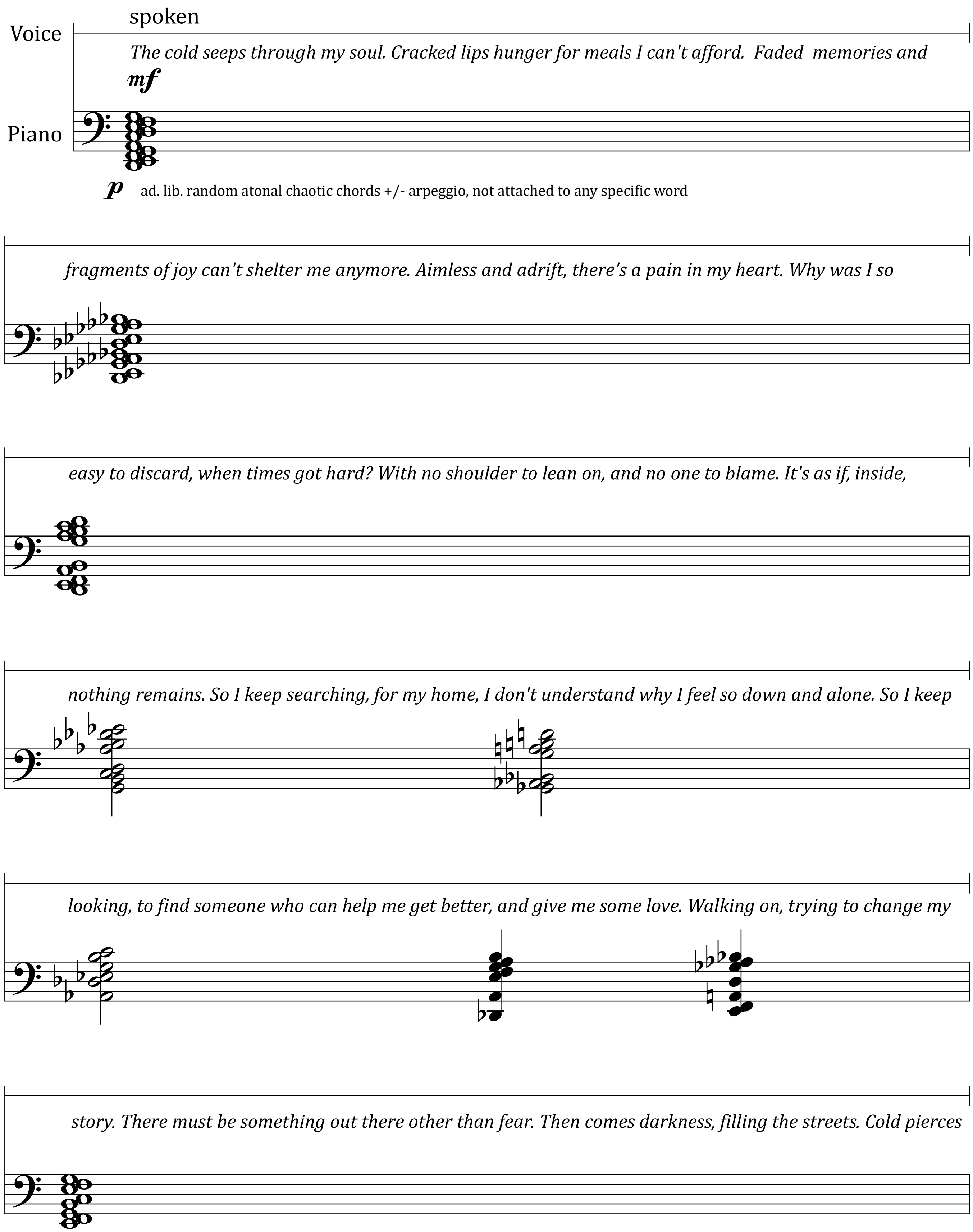

right I got the si-lent-con-nect - ion
si-lent-con-nect - ion
and he says
I don't know where I'm go - ing but it's gon - na be o - kay Oh,


22
I don't know where I'm go - ing but it's gon - na shine to - day and he says
22
f
24
I'm al - right with the si lent con nect ion
24
ff
26
I 'm gon na be o - kay He's got
26
mf


28
two left shoes and no thing to lose but he will find his way He's
28
30
down on his luck he can't make a buck but it will shine to day.
30
rit.
mp

Searching

Thomas F Heston




deep, and the rain hides my weeping. No haven in sight, not rest for my feet.
Andante
So I keep search ing for my home I just don't know what hap pened but
now I'm a lone. So I keep won der ing if there will be some one to help me
in from the cold and give me some love. Rest less all through the night. No
room by the fi re, no rest for my wear y head. Then a voice of ferred


rall.
me this es cape said it would make my night go ea sy. So I did.
fermata breve
a tempo
But I keep sear ching and keep wand er ing.
It's so con fus ing. So I keep mov ing.
Day aft er day, no hope in sight a mis dir
ec tion then lost. Bet ter to stay up all night. So I drift a long, aim less


through the street I can't see what's a head It's just a sea of con crete
Shive ring in dark ness I hide. I've no place to go, no end in my sights
Won't some one please just hold me tight, and give me peace for at least to night.
rall.
fermata breve
a tempo
But I'm still a lone But I keep sear ching
and keep wand er ing. It's so con fus ing.


So I keep mov ing.
Sear ching and wand er ing,
then mov ing on.
Some thing is wait ing
repeat multiple times until fade
I know it won't be long.
ad. lib.
1.
2.

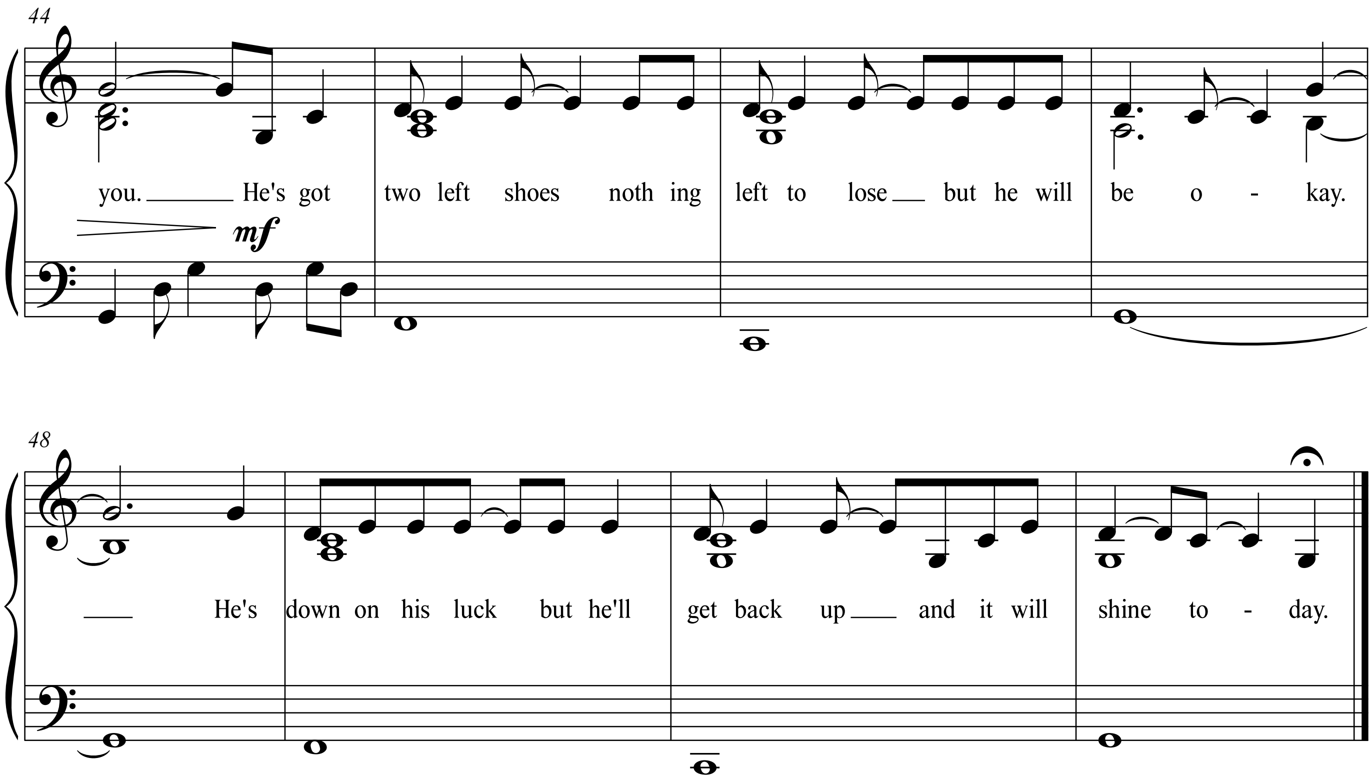
Through the Cold Weather

Thomas F Heston




15
and do bet ter. Af ter the stor my night comes your morn ing light. You
19
Helped me find strength in my hard est fight and it came from some where deep in side.
22
So I'm gon na do bet ter, gon na be bet ter. Just
26
bet ter. I'll make it through the cold est wea ther. and do


30
bet ter. I still have it in side, so I'll make thinkgs right. Just
33
wait, you'll see - I have the strength in me. And it's time that I set it free.
36
Back to you Gon na make my way back to
f
40
you. It's been in side and now I see the truth gon na find my way back to


44
you. He's got two left shoes noth ing left to lose but he will be o - kay.
mf
48
He's down on his luck but he'll get back up and it will shine to - day.